

Revivalism is not simply a matter to be studied as history. It is most assuredly alive and present with us in our own day. However, the historical revivalistic roots of modern evangelicalism are important to understand, for the minister as well as the layperson. In fact, apart from the historical roots of revivalism, evangelicalism cannot be properly understood. Additionally, in order for change to come about in America's churches, tendencies that were carried over from this period must be abandoned. The dominant tendency, it will be argued, is the anthropocentric concentration of the revivalists and later entire denominations as opposed to a biblical theocentric focus that ought to define the Christian church.

Revivalism is defined by Merriam Webster as "the spirit or methods characteristic of religious revivals; and, a tendency or desire to revive or restore."<sup>1</sup> For this paper, the definition of revivalism in America will combine the aforementioned definition and the conclusion made by W. Glyn Evans that American revivalism has been particularly strong in regard to its preaching being "person-directed and person-compelled."<sup>2</sup>

It is my aim to contend that the thrust of revivalism was man-centered and thus a core characteristic of modern-day evangelicalism is anthropocentrism. This man-centeredness has been carried over into all denominations and can be found in church growth efforts, evangelism, spiritual growth teachings, and on any given Sunday in the pulpits of most churches. It removes God from his throne and rapes him of his sovereignty. It is prominent in Arminianism which promotes man's will as well as in Dispensationalism which promotes individualism. Although most Christians would argue

---

<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster, I. (1996, c1993). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. Includes index. (10th ed.). Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.: Merriam-Webster.

<sup>2</sup> W. Glyn Evans, "Jonathan Edwards – Puritan Paradox," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 124* (January 1967) : 58-59. Dallas Theological Seminary.

that they are God-centered in their thinking, the proof is in the pudding. Our capitalistic disposition that is instilled in us from infancy effects us as Christians. If we are to understand and combat our man-centeredness, we must understand, historically, how we got to where we are.

True revival begins with true believers first. To revive something assumes that it has once been alive. Therefore, revival begins with the repentance of the Church and then may or may not see a large harvest of souls. In America, however, the term revival has been redefined. It is used to describe not usually a repenting of the Church and a revitalization of the Body of Christ toward holiness, but rather an effort to evangelize lost people through preaching and possibly through other modes. “Revivals” are held annually at many churches throughout the country. These meetings are usually evangelistic in focus and are characterized by preaching, singing, invitations, and sometimes healing services. The problem arises quickly when pastors and churches can conduct such “revivals” while sin is never dealt with among believers. An example of this is the number of revivalistic periods that occurred and found success in the South during slavery and racism. Even recently, years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Reinhold Niebuhr urged Billy Graham to preach more about racism in a country where revivalism prospered in the midst of this great sin that was as prevalent among the “born again” as those who were not.<sup>3</sup> When the focus is on man, how he can be saved, how he can get help from God, and such, sin does not truly have to be confronted.

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Pyne, “The New Man and Immoral Society,” *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 154* (July 1997) : 273. Dallas Theological Seminary.

Charles Grandison Finney was a significant figure in America's revivalism. Born in 1792, he has been called "the father of modern revivalism."<sup>4</sup> He developed a theology of revivalism to defend his methods, many of which were criticized. Finney did not believe men were depraved, but rather had the capacity to sin. Men did not have a "sin nature" but rather were only sinners when they sinned. For one to be saved, therefore, he must cease making decisions to please himself and start making decisions to glorify God. It is the individual who must change his own will.<sup>5</sup> Donald Wiseman comments on Finney by quoting B.B. Warfield who said, "It is clear that what Finney gives us is less a theology than a rationalistic system of morality."<sup>6</sup> This rationalistic system of morality is clear today among those who are more interested in issues of morality than they are in a broken and contrite heart. Churches that forbid beer tolerate and in some cases promote racism. Churches that restrict women from wearing makeup tolerate pornography. I personally served in one church alongside a senior pastor who had me commit to not drinking any alcohol before he hired me, only to find out later that for more than two years he was involved in an adulterous affair. Revivalism because of its anthropomorphic thrust, promoted a pharisaical conformity to the law, while never dealing with the matters of the heart.

Finney's rationalistic system of morality was ripe for the picking during this time. The Age of Reason had sent shockwaves throughout the world. Ahlstrom explains that this period was dominated by uncertainty in the "relevance of the church" and "science

---

<sup>4</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1972), 459.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, "Charles Finney's Theology of Revival: Moral Depravity," *Master's Seminary Journal Volume 6* (Fall 1995) : 208-209. The Master's Seminary.

<sup>6</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, "Abraham in History and Tradition – Part II: Abraham the Prince," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 134* (July 1977) : 252-253. Dallas Theological Seminary.

seemed to undermine the Christian message.”<sup>7</sup> People wanted to feel justified in their choices for why they did things. Darwin’s “Origin of the Species” was published in 1859 compounding the attack on the supernatural. Christians became intimidated by those who claimed scientific proof for a variety of things. As much as Finney and other revivalists may have wanted to promote the Gospel of Christ, this rationalistic system only etched away the confidence that many Christians up to that point had in the Bible being God’s element of communication to man. This etching was and still is “below the radar.” Many people who claim a belief in the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture still hold to Finney’s type of thought-pattern, whereby rationalistic systems are taught and studied pertaining to discipleship, evangelism, worship, etc... When one church grows rapidly in America today, books are written and seminars are held so that people can emulate the “rationalistic system” in their own community in hopes of duplicating the growth. John Muether comments on Finney’s impact in contemporary evangelicalism in his article regarding the “New School” in contemporary evangelicalism. Specifically, Muether addresses Fuller Theological Seminary and the leadership of Donald McGavran over the Institute of Church Growth. Muether writes, “McGavran’s pragmatism, his attention to marketing considerations, and his mastery of technique were all rooted in the nineteenth century New School revivalism of Charles Finney, who replaced “Calvinism with milder, more preachable doctrines in most of American revivalism.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ahlstrom, p. 738

<sup>8</sup> John R. Muether, “Contemporary Evangelicalism and the Triumph of the New School,” *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 50* (Fall 1988) : 343. Westminster Theological Seminary.

Finney's rationalistic system was not the only dominating thought system that emerged during this time. Another dominant thought pattern that developed was the individualism of salvation and religion. Where the Puritans saw salvation as an act of God upon man, many of the revivalists saw and preached salvation as an act of man upon God. This Armenian thought pattern multiplied and soon it became so entrenched in people's minds that entire denominations moved from a Reformed heritage to becoming predominantly Armenian and man-centered. However, these denominations, even today, do not boast that their theology is man-centered, or that they have a low view of God's sovereignty, or that salvation is not God's work. On the contrary, many would vehemently argue they hold to such dogmas. However, just as this anthropomorphic mindset crept in "under the radar" during Revivalism, it has remained "under the radar" to this day. In commenting on Mark Noll's book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, John Hannah writes,

"Noll...and others...see the church being informed more by pragmatism, individualism, emotionalism, and technology than by the Scriptures. The roots of what might be called Gnostic or docetic evangelicalism—a Christianity that is focused on separatist, privatized spirituality—are found in three movements: revivalism, which has "hamstrung the life of the mind"; the American Revolution, wherein disestablishment brought marketing strategies into vogue; and the Enlightenment, the rise of Common Sense egalitarian theories of reality and apologetics. These three forces have limited evangelicalism's influence on the nation by creating a false separation between spirituality and the pursuit of the arts and sciences, the realm of the heart and the realm of the public."<sup>9</sup>

Revivalism played an integral role in voiding America's churches of their ability to think, simply by centering its theology upon man's experience rather than on God's

---

<sup>9</sup> John D. Hannah, "Book Review of 'The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind' By Mark A. Noll," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 152* (April 1995) : 234-235. Dallas Theological Seminary.

unchanging Word (even if that man-centered theology was based on his experience to God's Word, it is still based upon a subjective experience rather than an objective standard).

One system of theology that this individualistic framework served best (and was also served by) was dispensationalism<sup>10</sup>. Michael Williams suggests this in his article in the 10<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Grace Theological Journal* (a journal published by a dispensational-sympathetic seminary, nonetheless). However, as Williams points out, as much as individualism and dispensationalism are associates, this "heightened individualism of classical dispensationalism...was never required by dispensationalism as a theological system."<sup>11</sup> It has still come to characterize many in dispensational circles, including entire denominations. For example, many Baptists claim no creed but the Bible. It is surprising, as Clark Pinnock<sup>12</sup> points out 30 years ago, that such a stance would lead to a low view of the Bible. He writes:

"It is less surprising when we consider the strong tendency of Baptists to locate truth in the saving encounter with Christ, rather than in the objective

---

<sup>10</sup> My intention is not to attack dispensationalists or Baptists, but rather to show the effects of the anthropocentric predisposition of revivalism upon a significant number of evangelicals today (i.e. dispensationalists). I recognize that many in this camp do have a high view of Scripture and of God's sovereignty, but I have also observed that at times this theology is not applied to all of life when these same people pursue programs and methods without confronting heart issues and by this try to be like everyone who appears successful, or swing to the opposite end of the pendulum and become isolationists, pointing out how everyone else is wrong on some doctrinal issue or another.

<sup>11</sup> Michael D. Williams, "Where's the Church? The Church as the Unfinished Business of Dispensational Theology," *Grace Theological Journal Volume 10* (Fall 1989) : 177 Grace Seminary.

<sup>12</sup> As helpful as this quote by Pinnock may be, it is interesting to note his most recent flirtations with the notion of open theism. It was just last month that he was brought before the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) at their annual meeting for a vote on whether to remove him for his stance on this issue. More information at:

<http://www.etsjets.org>

truth outside themselves. The effects of revivalism upon them prepared the way, oddly enough, for them to be ravaged by liberal and later by neo-orthodox theology. For this simple reason, Liberalism and neo-orthodoxy also emphasize that the doctrines of Christianity are grounded in personal religious experience and not upon external authorities. Therefore, when untrained Baptists are confronted with subtle forms of liberal theology, classical or existential, they are not able to resist it intellectually, even though their instinctive reaction is hesitant.”<sup>13</sup>

What Pinnock notes here is a tendency that is duplicated in throughout numerous evangelical churches in America, of which the Baptists are only one example. When one’s theology is concerned more with man’s experience rather than God’s actions (known most clearly and certainly through His Word), his ability to confront heresy as it creeps in becomes impotent.

Beyond Baptists, but certainly including many, revivalism shaped a movement that climaxed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that came to be known as Fundamentalism<sup>14</sup>. The beginnings of this movement were a reaction to evolution, the Social Gospel, and liberal theology as it lured more and more Christians away from the truth.<sup>15</sup> But this fight against modernism became so man-centered that it developed into legalism and flirted with heresy. It was not easy for Christians during this time to decide which camp to join. This conundrum can be seen no more clearly than in the life of Gresham Machen. Machen did not care for the term “fundamentalist”, nor did he believe that Christians

---

<sup>13</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, “Baptists And Biblical Authority,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 17* (Fall 1974) : 203. The Evangelical Theological Society.

<sup>14</sup> Fundamentalism is a mindset that can occur and flourish in any denomination or theological camp, including Presbyterians and/or those who are Reformed. It is simply conservatism taken too far (manifested dominantly through legalism/pharisaicalism) so that in an effort to maintain orthodoxy, orthodoxy is sacrificed. Specifically in America, Fundamentalism’s effects were felt strongly well into the 1950s, and certainly they can still be found lingering today.

<sup>15</sup> D. G. Hart, “The Tie That Divides: Presbyterian Ecumenism, Fundamentalism, And The History Of Twentieth-Century American Protestantism,” *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 60* (Spring 1998) : 86. Westminster Theological Seminary.

were to separate themselves completely from the world in which they lived. Yet he understood that to live as a Christian would cause one to appear to unbelievers as a sectarian or isolationist. Machen recognized that liberalism was not simply an accommodation to transitions in European state-churches, nor was it a movement led by a minority fringe group; rather, as D.G. Hart points out:

“modernism was symptomatic of American Protestantism since the Second Great Awakening. From Machen’s perspective, the churches were more interested in having an impact upon American society, in establishing their morals as the standards of the nation, than they were in proclaiming the good news of the gospel.”<sup>16</sup>

Hart mentions further that Machen desired to pull the church back to a biblical understanding that its identity was to be found in doctrine and not in personal experience or good deeds.<sup>17</sup> Whether modernism shaped American Protestantism or vice-a-versa could be debated endlessly. It could certainly be agreed upon that both were intertwined. Furthermore, the fundamentalist movement, as much as it attempted to be isolated, was very much at the center of American Protestantism during this period, and therefore very much intertwined with modernism. The revivalistic focus on one’s personal experience with the Gospel, the number of conversions that a revivalist “had”, and the opposite moral poles that were preached (either Finney’s get right and then come to Jesus or the more prominent easy-believism) all laid the foundation for fundamentalism to eventually head in a direction just as wrong as liberalism.

Another area where revivalism’s anthropomorphic predisposition has affected Evangelicalism today is environmentalism. The modern environmental movement is

---

<sup>16</sup> D. G. Hart, “Christianity and Liberalism in a Postliberal Age,” *Westminster Theological Journal* Volume 56 (Fall 1994) : 336. Westminster Theological Seminary.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

relatively young, coming into its own right in the late 1960's. It was a movement made up of people from all types of persuasions, including evangelicals. However, a majority of evangelicals have been opposed to most efforts to protect the environment. In a 1998 article in the Trinity Journal, the authors provide the explanation that this opposition is based heavily on the anthropomorphic bent of many evangelicals. They refer to a paper written by Lynn White, Jr. in 1967 in which he argues that one's view of the environment and ecological issues is based upon one's religion. He goes on to argue that the anthropocentrism of many evangelicals is to blame for their lack of concern for the environment. The authors concur with White, stating:

“For most of its history, the Christian church has emphasized human-God and human-human relationships; non-human components of creation have been given little attention. Hence, what we call the subjectionist<sup>18</sup> perspective has a long history within Christianity... Subjectionism has a complicated relationship with Christianity, particularly in the context of modern environmentalism. Today, it seems to be most strongly associated with fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. It is based on a “strong anthropocentrism” of the sort lambasted by White.”<sup>19</sup>

Although not as significant as doctrinal issues, the issue of the environment does shed light on the contemporary impacts of revivalism. The authors mention three common characteristics of evangelicals regarding the environment that will sound familiar to anyone who has walked much in evangelical circles. These characteristics are, 1) They discount scientific assertions regarding the environment claiming that they are untrue, 2) they call any pro-environmental thought “new age” and unchristian, and 3) they stress

---

<sup>18</sup> With respect to modern environmentalism, what we term “subjectionism” is essentially synonymous with much of the so-called “anti-environmentalism” or in some cases “environmental optimism” literature.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond E. Grizzle, Paul E. Rothrock, Christopher B. Barrett, “Evangelicals And Environmentalism: Past, Present, And Future,” *Trinity Journal Volume 19* (Spring 1998) : 6. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

the considerable economic costs of environmental policies.<sup>20</sup> When one bases their theology on experience and focuses more on what man should become than on who God is, then they have no means to legitimately counter that with which they disagree. They often become intimidated and then create arguments that are no more justifiable by Scripture than the arguments they oppose. This is certainly characteristic of what has happened in the past thirty years regarding views of the environment among evangelicals. However, from Scripture we must see that Creation was not given to man for his own wanton pleasure. Man was simply given responsibility of caring for it.<sup>21</sup>

The anthropocentric impact of revivalism on America is significant. Today most Baptists do not even know that their roots and doctrinal heritage are Reformed. Many evangelicals talk of self-esteem as if it is a biblically promoted character trait. Denominations promote and compare conversions as if they are some type of trophy. Many evangelicals believe thoughts like, “God helps those who help themselves”, and “If you don’t witness to a person and they die and go to hell, then their blood will be on your hands.” Such man-centered thinking is unbiblical and although it can not be blamed entirely on revivalism (there is nothing new under the sun), man-centered Christianity certainly has received much from revivalism.

As brief as American history is, it could be argued that the church in America has developed the tendency to conform to the culture around it. Rather than cling to the Bible and believe that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and that He

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>21</sup> See Genesis 1:26-31. Note that the command is for man to subdue creation and that he is given dominion over it all. However, if we look at God’s sovereign care over us, his creatures, he does not abuse us for his own pleasure. Rather he nurtures us. All creation exists for His glory. The dominion (sovereignty) of creation *given* to man is always to be subject to God’s glory.

made man in His own image, Christians looked for ways to integrate what the culture said was “scientific fact” and what the Bible actually stated. The same has happened in the arena of psychology. The church in America has been intimidated by the secular humanists, and has handed over their brains to the psychologists and the psychiatrists rather than looking to God’s Word for help and understanding. Now, the institution of marriage is on the brinks. Why has all of this happened? For the most part, as has been argued throughout this paper, evangelicals consider their religion as one of experience. They think, “I walked an aisle,” or, “I had a warm sensation,” or even “I invited Jesus into my heart.” That is about as far as the common denominators go. “Just Jesus,” many say, as they hold hands at an ecumenical prayer breakfast and sing “Bind us Together.”

We ought not be surprised that man-centered Christianity has come to dominate American Evangelicalism. Paul prophesied this would happen, stating “For people will be lovers of self.”<sup>22</sup> Yet we cannot become complacent that this is simply the way it must be. Theology must return to the seminaries, and doctrine must dominate the teaching and preaching in churches. The term “revival” must be given back its biblical meaning. It must be understood as a reviving of true believers, their repentance and renewal. It must be coupled with rich theological depth. George Peters articulates this point in a writing on missions:

“In order to be lasting and dynamic, theology and revival must be interrelated and must be channelled into evangelism and world missions. It is a sobering fact of history that theology can grow stale and static. It needs the companionship of revival. On the other hand no revival has been able to sustain its glow unless it was built on a sound biblical basis and had built into it an energetic “go” of evangelism. Therefore, biblical and theological studies must not be separated from revivalism and

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (electronic ed.) (2 Ti 3:2). Wheaton: Good News Publishers.

missions in the training of Christian leaders, and revival and evangelistic fervor are necessary in order to keep evangelicalism from growing stale and becoming a sort of lifeless “modern-day scholasticism.”<sup>23</sup>

If the church in America will embrace biblical theology and recognize that our religion is not about us (not just giving this lip-service); if believers will understand worship as honoring a King and not something we “do” in a service and create so that everyone will enjoy; if Christians will recognize that it is God who saves and not man who “finds Jesus”; then, American evangelicalism can begin to reclaim its identity and shine its light that honors our Father in heaven.

---

<sup>23</sup> George W. Peters, “Perspectives On The Church’s Mission Part 2: Missions In Historical Perspective,” *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 136* (April 1979) : 106. Dallas Theological Seminary.

### Works Cited

- Ahlstrom, Sydney E. 1972. *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Evans, W. Glyn 1967. "Jonathan Edwards – Puritan Paradox," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 124*. Dallas Theological Seminary.
- Grizzle, Raymond E., Paul E. Rothrock, Christopher B. Barrett 1998. "Evangelicals And Environmentalism: Past, Present, And Future," *Trinity Journal Volume 19*. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.
- Hannah, John D. 1995. "Book Review of 'The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind' By Mark A. Noll," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 152*. Dallas Theological Seminary.
- Hart, D. G. 1994. "Christianity and Liberalism in a Postliberal Age," *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 56*. Westminster Theological Seminary.
- Hart, D. G. 1998. "The Tie That Divides: Presbyterian Ecumenism, Fundamentalism, And The History Of Twentieth-Century American Protestantism," *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 60*. Westminster Theological Seminary.
- The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. 2001. Wheaton: Good News Publishers.
- Sean Michael Lucas, "Charles Finney's Theology of Revival: Moral Depravity," *Master's Seminary Journal Volume 6* (Fall 1995) : 208-209. The Master's Seminary.
- Merriam-Webster, I. (1996, c1993). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. Includes index. (10th ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
- Muether, John R. 1988. "Contemporary Evangelicalism and the Triumph of the New School," *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 50*. Westminster Theological Seminary.
- Peters, George W. 1979. "Perspectives On The Church's Mission Part 2: Missions In Historical Perspective," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 136*. Dallas Theological Seminary.
- Pinnock, Clark H. 1974. "Baptists And Biblical Authority", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 17*. The Evangelical Theological Society.
- Pyne, Robert A. 1997. "The New Man and Immoral Society," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 154*. Dallas Theological Seminary.

Williams, Michael D. 1989. "Where's the Church? The Church as the Unfinished Business of Dispensational Theology", *Grace Theological Journal Volume 10*. Grace Seminary.

Wiseman, Donald J. 1977. "Abraham in History and Tradition – Part II: Abraham the Prince," *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 134*. Dallas Theological Seminary.